

“May the philosophers of existence do better next time”! Canguilhem, *Life and death*’s end.

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**Abstract**

Leftover translations from *Vie et mort de Jean Cavailles*.

## Introduction : the many cyphers of Cavailles

*Life and death (Vie et mort de Jean Cavailles)* is the collection of three talks by Georges Canguilhem.

The first took place in 1967 at the University of Strasbourg (where Cavailles had been professor, an auditorium was named in his honor), the second in 1969 on Radio (*France Culture*), the third in 1974 "at the Sorbonne", we can add here more accurately Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne<sup>1</sup>.

One gets the strong impression that between the first two of these texts and the other, Canguilhem had gained new information and was able to provide more, new details.

Among others, he gives here the many nicknames used by Cavailles in the Resistance (beyond merely "Carriere").

Cavaillès had lived many lives contrary to some – greater than human years.

No Sartre. No bathrobe-and-slippers intellectual.

In one of them, we find him "working" at the Crillon hotel, Hitler's favorite in Paris. Canguilhem's rendition and interpretation of these events leave one dumbfounded. – Even if half-correct they are the true material of movies.

But, one thing is almost certain : Cavailles had lived all of his lives with much courage, intellectual and personal alike.

No : they are inseparable, argues Canguilhem;

To understand one, we must understand the other.

May the philosophers of existence do better next time – old and new.

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"*I sing of War, and a man at war...*", so begins an Epic poem in the hands of a competent translator. The collective tragedy, and the inner turmoil, fight inside...

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<sup>1</sup>Where the Cavailles Room is located, and where classes and conferences continue to take place.

[... If that's not a hero, what is?!]

Speaking about Jean Cavailles is not easy. There's some shame involved : we came back, he didn't; then surely this means we did less than him.

But, if we do not talk about him, who will be able to tell the difference?

The difference between his selfless actions, of no afterthoughts, and the Resistance of these resisting intellectuals, whose resistance was so discrete only they are able to tell of it? (Their propensity for egocentric talk.)

Certain philosophers showed indignation because certain others had dared to create a philosophy without personal subject. (...)

This philosophy from which Jean Cavailles is *radically* absent : It was the same that led him to a place of no return... Intricate arguments of logic, first, the rest followed.

Jean Cavailles incarnates the logic of resistance right down to the death.

May the philosophers of existence do better next time! – if they can.

#### COMMEMORATION AT THE SORBONNE (Cavailles room, January 19th 1974)

Why 30 years later? Why not every year, or every day?

(...) testimony in a place of teaching, learning.

(...)

One ought to pay more attention to the deaths of academics — when they do not die of old age or disease, that is... In particular the deaths of philosophers whose scientific duty, the Stoics tell us, is precisely to learn to die.

(...)

Those who are still alive can count those who died fighting... (...)

During the terrible Nazi years in Europe, there were those who fought inside organized and underground networks – they wore no uniforms, had no papers, and none of the legal protections / recognition either.

Among them : Cavailles, Gosset, Pierre Kaan, Cuzin, Lautman, Feldman, Politzer. And others I forget, no doubt.

Like all collective human enterprises, the Resistance had its share of selfless and adroit people [*habiles*], those who talked a lot and those who did, heroes and ambitious ones – to say nothing of the downright criminal ones, crooks and traitors.

History remembers a few exemplary figures, but the living among them have in common to know, and to tell, all that the Resistance owed to the many men and women who never thought more than their actions were duties, and never that they deserved a place in history.

Their fights were efficient; based on courageous, patient and modest [*silencieuse*] cooperation.

(...)

Cavailles : a French philosopher trained between the two wars in a tradition of rationalism, reactivated at the beginning of the 20th century by the many paradoxes and controversies of mathematical [thought and] philosophy.

Another philosopher-mathematician, Louis Couturat, death in 1914, thirty years before Cavailles', had extended his research on logic in the manner of Leibniz to form the project of a universal language, an instrument of peace within international scientific cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

It was the same Irenicism that had pushed Couturat to correct Ferdinand Brunetiere, the parrot of the "death of science", as part of a strangely rationalist interpretation of Kant's *Perpetual peace*.

However, it's one thing to keep a cool head in the midst of an ideological folly [*delire*], it's an entirely other to risk one's own head as part of a fight – initially uncertain, as it was – against a military victorious political regime.

(...)

In this "Cavailles Room" [in which we are], I could not *not* mention the many names of Jean Cavailles :

Carpentier  
Marty  
Chennevieres  
Carriere  
Herve  
Crillon

— and that's only some of them...

All these names are the false names of the real Cavailles.

Behind these names, there are various hidden identities : the member of the steering committee of *Liberation*, the intelligence agent, communication agent with London, the carrier of explosives, the mechanic in blue workers' wear who infiltrated the Kriegsmarine buildings in Lorient.

Among the many figures of Cavailles, there was one – a possible though in no way imaginary one – of *maitre d'hotel* [butler] at the hotel Crillon in Paris, false certificates and all. The Crillon : Hitler's favorite when on visit in Paris. It shouldn't be too hard to guess why.

This was Cavailles in all of his lives. Of his many faces, his friends remember the one of his twenties and thirties the most; grave but radiant... His sense of humor, sometimes scathing, would strike it like lightning.

(...)

In the newspaper that Cavailles held tight under his left arm were the pages, tracts, pamphlets of which he was the author.

"*There is no case.*"

Cavailles was a philosopher and terrorist, a chief-executioner, professor at the Sorbonne and Resistance member *rue Docteur-Roux*, prisoner of the French State and [clandestine] author of *The Logic and Theory of Science*.

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<sup>2</sup>Trans. note : Ido (constructed language).

[To his various interrogators, he told a many things, and nothing, of the ones that mattered : ]

Arrested by the Gestapo, Cavailles readily admitted all the facts as they pertained to him.

His actions were justified by the death of Rene Parodi<sup>3</sup>, and by family tradition – his father had been a military officer. He told them of Kant... And, had tried to tell them of Spinoza, though that turned out to be harder.

(...)

“There is no case *anymore*” [These are no times for casuistry]. But, one shouldn’t mistake false for true either. I think, this was the lesson of the one that they, the Germans shot at Arras in 1944.

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<sup>3</sup>Trans. note : Magistrate, Resistance fighter (b. 1904, d. 1942 Fresnes Prison).